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What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?

How do we communicate the value of official statistics?

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Summary

To communicate the value of official statistics we must communicate information on the factors that go into them, specifically their relevance and the confidence that people have in the data. The communication must target priority groups, using appropriate means. In France, the priority groups are the media, government bodies and the public. The communication strategy of the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) (INSEE) is built on three pillars: education, connection and proof. It communicates the value of the statistics mainly by means of the following: an annual report; a communication toolkit, issued yearly; answers to queries; and meetings, several of which have been scheduled for late 2013 and early 2014 on the theme, "official statistics and democracy: what good are figures?"

This document is being submitted for discussion at a seminar of the European Conference of Statisticians on the question, "What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?"

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I. Introduction

1. With the Internet, an increasing amount of data is being distributed. Since Web 2.0, anyone can produce data and send it to everyone through the web. As "big data" has developed, companies and bodies have been able to analyse all these various types of information and produce synthetic data. There is a risk that official statistics may be lost in this immense mass of data, as people will not know about them or will have faith in unofficial statistics.

2. Official statistics have a value that sets them apart from other data. They are constructed according to methods and guidelines that give them an upper hand (in terms of reliability and comparability, for instance) and that make it possible to use them as reference data.

4. Statisticians have to be able to assess the value of official statistics and to communicate that value. This document gives some indications on how this can be done.

5. Before discussing how to communicate the value of official statistics, we should go over what the value is. According to recent studies, the value (or added value) of official statistics (V) can be measured as follows:

V = S * M * A * R * T * L, where:

S is the number of statistics produced;

M is a measure of the performance of the media used to reach the target audience;

A is the number of persons who require the official statistics, or the potential audience. The product of M and A gives the number of users who find the official statistics;

R is the relevance of the official statistics sent to users. From the users' standpoint, this is the quality of the statistics;

T is the trust in the official statistics; and

L is statistic and economic literacy[1] and culture, or the ability to reason using numbers and other mathematical concepts, and using economic concepts.[2] It reflects the ability of users to properly understand, interpret and use statistics.

6. The value of official statistics thus depends on these six factors. If one factor is absent, the value is nil.

II. What can we communicate about the value of official statistics?

7. In this part we will take a look at what we can use to communicate the value of official statistics. If we want to get across the value of statistics, we cannot directly speak of

[1] According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "literacy" is defined as "the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential".

[2] Statistical culture is the ability to comprehend numbers, quantities, basic mathematical concepts, the main statistical indicators (medians, averages, proportions), statistical reasoning and the meaning of a probability.

"the value of statistics" per se. We have to address one or more of these six factors: statistics, media, potential audience, relevance, trust and literacy (SMARTL). We can also communicate the value by referring to elements that consolidate these six factors. For example, we can mention the independence of the body issuing the statistics, which consolidates trust in it.

8. (S) We can provide information on the number of official statistics produced and distributed. This is not so easy to do, as there are very many official statistics. To do so, we can for example provide information on:

(a) Subjects covered (unemployment, population, poverty, etc.);

(b) Kinds of data distributed (tables with main indicators, databases, etc.); and

(c) Volume of data distributed (in megabytes or gigabytes).

9. (M) We can provide information on the media that we use to distribute our data, as follows:

(a) General media: our websites, publications, smartphone apps, web applications and social media (Twitter, etc.);

(b) Our specialized media: for journalists, our press conferences and press releases; for expert users, conferences and meetings, etc.; and

(c) Media of other organizations: other websites (data.gouv, Ministry of Education, partners' websites), press, exhibitions, museums, etc.

10. (A) It is difficult to measure and give information on the potential audience. However, we can provide information on the actual audience, which is the product of the media performance, M, and the potential audience, A (or M * A). For example, it is possible to communicate:

(a) Some figures about visits to our website: number of visits, of visitors, or of gigabytes downloaded (daily, monthly or annually); and

(b) Some figures about social media: number of subscribers to our Twitter account, etc.

11. (R) To provide information on the relevance of official statistics, first we must measure it, which means collecting our users' opinions. With the Internet, this is not easy, as more often than not we do not see our users. In order to be effective, and because collecting users' opinions helps first to improve the statistics and later to improve communication, we should give preference to:

(a) Collecting their opinions on specific subjects, and on new subjects every year;

(b) Working with colleagues who are specialists in the selected subjects;

(c) Interviewing different users: specialists and beginners, and if possible, also potential users, teachers, local authorities, people in national government, researchers, students, journalists, private companies, associations and individuals; and

(d) Using one or several methods to collect their opinions in relation to the subject in question; online survey using a pop-up window on our website; online e-mail survey; focus groups; personal interviews; phone interviews; analysis of the queries we receive; analysis of consultation statistics for our website, etc.

12. (T) To provide information on the trust that people have in official statistics, we should first measure it by asking people about their trust in statistics. It is important to interview at least two groups every year: the public at large, and visitors to the INSEE

website, as the two groups give different opinions; website visitors are more specialized than the public. It is also possible to interview other groups when necessary. For example, a group of journalists may be interviewed if a specific issue concerns them or if the Institute's strategy involves specific activities for them. In order for such interviews to help improve the statistics, and to be able to communicate several of the constituent elements of trust, at least the following questions should be asked:

(a) A general question about statistics, such as, "Generally, would you say that you trust the figures and data published on the economic and social situation in France?";

(b) If people find the figures and data published on the economic and social situation in France to be suspect, then some questions should be asked to find out why, for example to elicit replies such as: "These figures have no correspondence with my situation and the situation of those around me"; "Politicians make them say what they want them to say"; or "I do not know what these figures represent or how they are produced";

(c) Subsequently, a series of individual indicators should be addressed, including the unemployment rate, the growth rate and the consumer price index, with the question: "For each of the following figures and data, please tell me if they give a very good, good, poor or very bad reflection of what is happening in France in the field in question"; and

(d) At the end, questions should be posed regarding the Institute: a general question such as, "Is your opinion of INSEE very good, good, bad or very bad", followed by questions such as, "Is INSEE a useful body?", "Does INSEE provide good information on its activities?", "Is the information produced and disseminated by INSEE independent of political influence?" and "Is the information on the French economy produced and distributed by INSEE reliable?"

13. (L) It is very difficult to measure statistical and economic literacy. We are currently carrying out a survey regarding some definitions (median, gross domestic product (GDP), etc.) and will have the results in a few months. There may then be something to communicate on this subject.

14. Among the six factors, communication is easy for the first three (the number of statistics, the media used and the audience) and very difficult (or even impossible) for the last (literacy). It is not easy, but very important, to provide information on the fourth and fifth factors: relevance and trust.

15. V=SMARTL is a general formula, and it can also be used for a specific audience. The value of official statistics is not the same for the general public and for expert audiences, as their needs are not the same. The relevance factor, R, is dependent on the users' needs.

16. The formula can also be used for one part of official statistics, for example the statistics covering a given subject or a specific indicator, such as housing statistics or the unemployment rate.

III. How to communicate the value of official statistics?

17. In the preceding part we looked at the possible content to be used in communicating the value of official statistics. In this part we will look at how to communicate this content, giving a few examples of how this has been done in France.

18. How to communicate the value of official statistics depends on the overall communication strategy of the statistics body, which decides which audiences and indicators should be given priority.

19. In France, INSEE selects the priority audience based on its importance and its opinions of statistics. INSEE has three priority audiences: the media, local and national government figures and the public at large. It is indeed necessary to maintain good relations with the media and the authorities. Because opinions of statistics are much more negative among the general public than in other groups, five years ago INSEE added the public as a priority audience. INSEE decides which indicators to prioritize by combining two criteria: the most general and generally accessible, and the ones in which there is the lowest level of confidence. The consumer price index and the unemployment rate are among the indicators that are thus given the highest priority.

20. Once the target audiences and the subjects have been selected, another decision remains: what media to use. The media depends on the target audience, the subjects and the overall communication strategy of the Institute. In France, in order to give the indicators a stronger image, INSEE has drawn up a list of action to be taken in the short and medium term, in line with these three factors:

(a) Connection: People who are connected with the Institute have a better image of its work and of the indicators, and many people wish to know more about the Institute's activities;

(b) Education: One of the elements that explain mistrust of indicators is that people do not know how they are produced; and

(c) Proof: Another factor breeding mistrust of indicators is that people think they do not correspond with reality. Many people would like these figures and data to better reflect their personal situation and the situation of the people in their entourage.

21. The value of statistics is communicated, for example, by means of: the Institute's annual report; a communication toolkit; discussions at meetings or conferences; teaching tools; and through the use of the website.

22. The annual report provides a good means of highlighting the value of statistics, especially for the local and national authorities, by addressing five of the six factors in SMARTL: the kind of statistics disseminated; the main and new kinds of media used in the process; the audience of our website and Twitter account; and the most important results of our study on relevance and trust. For example, in our 2012 annual report we wrote the following:

(a) On www.insee.fr, users can now find millions of data of many kinds: framework data and key figures; historical data and time series; localized data for regions, municipalities, and neighbourhoods; and microdata at individual level, anonymized to comply with statistical confidentiality requirements [...];

(b) www.insee.fr has thus become INSEE's dissemination medium of choice. The number of visits has risen steadily from 10.8 million in 2004 to 25 million in 2012. However, while surveys indicate high satisfaction with the wealth of information available, visitors still report trouble locating the data they need. We are therefore preparing a new redesign, notably to improve navigation [...];

(c) 120,000 visits to www.insee.fr daily, 30,000 subscribers to *INSEE-Net Actualité*;

(d) 10,000 Twitter subscribers and 11 press conferences in 2012 [...];

(e) The press and audiovisual media are a vital link for the dissemination of INSEE statistics and studies. On average, our work is referred to in 60 media stories a day.

23. Every year, INSEE issues a kit on a different indicator (consumer price index, unemployment rate, growth rate, etc.) to show the public how it constructs the indicator,

who uses it and for what purpose. The kit is composed of three communication tools: an educational brochure entitled *Pour comprendre …* (To understand …); a short (under five-minute) video entitled *… en questions* (… in questions); and a quiz composed of 10 multiple-choice questions whose answers are in the brochure and video. Among other things, these tools make it possible to communicate the relevance of the data. We also use Twitter to tweet messages on the indicators and main results, and also on the tools used.

24. In 2013 the Conseil national pour l'information statistique (National Council for Statistical Information) (CNIS) and INSEE held several activities to strengthen confidence in official statistics. CNIS provides a forum for consultations between producers and users of official statistics, its activities ranging from the identification of sectors and subjects to be covered by surveys, to evaluations of surveys once they are completed. It has its own publications to inform the public. The Council has therefore held several activities with INSEE aimed at strengthening confidence in official statistics, under the general theme of "Official statistics and democracy: what good are figures?" The main purpose of these activities is to make the media, the local and national authorities and the general public aware of the value of official statistics.

25. Four activities have been carried out:

(a) Every year an Economics Day is held in November in Lyons, with the participation of a broad range of participants. In November 2013 INSEE and CNIS experts used studies of well-being to demonstrate the value of official statistics;

(b) In December 2013, a "media and statistics" seminar was held with the School of Journalism in Lille. CNIS and INSEE took part in this seminar in order to show future journalists the value of official statistics at a time when data journalism is developing;

(c) INSEE worked with an association called les Petits Débrouillards, which specializes in promoting science with children and teenagers, to develop teaching tools that will be used throughout France and will help strengthen confidence in official statistics; and

(d) The culmination of this approach will be a national conference and discussion scheduled for the end of January 2014. A broad range of statistics users have been invited: researchers, decision makers, public figures and journalists. The theme of the conference is to be "the usefulness of statistics".

26. We intend to put more information on the value of our statistics on our website in order to strengthen confidence in our statistics and their relevance. We intend for example to:

(a) Develop a section of our website to give the main results of satisfaction surveys conducted with users of official statistics;

(b) On our home page, communicate information that is not statistical, but that relates to the value of statistics, specifically the elements mentioned in paragraphs 17 to 20, above; and

(c) Include in some publications or press releases accounts from decision makers demonstrating in one or two simple sentences how they use the results and indicators that we publish.

27. Paragraphs 17 to 21 give examples of communication activities that we have decided to carry out and have prepared.

28. Furthermore, some communication activities provide immediate (or almost immediate) responses to a question or event. They can thus prevent a discussion that might challenge the quality of statistics in general or of our Institute or a given indicator from turning bad and from undermining confidence in official statistics.

29. We rely mainly on three means of following discussions relating to statistics and our Institute: by monitoring the Internet and social media; the press; and incoming questions. When selecting how to monitor the Internet and social media, every year we choose websites of interest, which cover our subjects and have audiences that are qualitatively and quantitatively significant. We do the same when we select which media outlets to monitor.

30. In general, we do not respond to questions or events found through our monitoring, as it is often more risky to respond than not to respond. When it is necessary to respond to a question, we do so through the appropriate media: press release, tweet, comment on one of our users' blogs, personal mail or message or phone call, etc. It is not easy to know when to reply, nor which media is most appropriate. We intend to analyse a number of cases handled over several months so as to draw up a strategy.

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